

## Discovery of the skeletons of many Sioux killed in war, buried near Fort L'Huillier /

### DISCOVERY OF THE SKELETONS OF MANY SIOUX KILLED IN WAR, BURIED NEAR FORT L'HUILLIER.\*

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Last June (1907) a Blue Earth county farmer, named William Mitchell, while digging into a mound on his farm for some gravel came upon a large number of headless human skeletons.

The mound in question is a mere natural formation and of a very common appearance. It embraces about half an acre of ground, and rises only about four or five feet above the adjoining land. It is located in a bit of pasture land in the northeast quarter of the southeast quarter of section 33 in South Bend township, Blue Earth county. At the western foot of the mound lies a boggy swale extending northeast and southwest. Originally the mound and all the land east of this swale to the Le Sueur river, about a mile distant, were covered with timber. Since the mound lay in the margin of the woods at the edge of the meadow or swale, the trees on it were never very large or numerous, but there was a thick growth of underbrush. The trees and brush were cleared off, however, a number of years ago.

The earliest settlers claim that when they first came into the country, in 1853, '54, and '55, the principal Indian trail leading out of the Minnesota valley, the Big Woods, and the Mankato country, into the regions along the Blue Earth and the vast plains beyond in the south and southwest, passed through the present city of Mankato and over the Walker hill into the Red Jacket valley, where it skirted along the foot of the mound upon which in 1700

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Le Sueur had built Fort L'Huillier, when prospecting along the Blue Earth river for the blue or green earth supposed to be an ore of copper. At the western foot of that mound the trail crossed the Le Sueur river and ascended the opposite bluff, and, following the highest ground, passed over the top of this small mound now on the Mitchell land about a mile and three-quarters southwest of the site of the old fort.

Seventeen skeletons have been found, all of them headless and belonging to adult males. Two flint arrowheads, with broken points, were found among the bones; and had any search been made before the skeletons and the gravel about them had been removed, doubtless more arrowheads would have been discovered. These arrowheads, and the fact that the bodies were decapitated, indicate strongly that the seventeen were killed by some savage foe. It is very evident, also, that the bodies were buried in dug graves, as the ground over them showed clearly that it had been disturbed,—chunks of clay and considerable gravel being found near the top, while some black soil was discovered near the bottom,—but elsewhere than above the bodies, the black soil, gravel and clay were in their natural positions.

The bodies had all been laid out after the manner of white men in burial. Each body had been laid on its back, with the arms close to the sides and both legs stretched side by side. Nothing was found with the skeletons except the two arrowheads above mentioned. The graves were from two and a half to three feet in depth. In one instance at least four bodies had been laid side by side in one grave. The dug graves, the laying out of the bodies, and the absence of aboriginal implements and trinkets, indicate very strongly that the burial was the work of white men.

The bones looked very old, and the gravelly knoll was well adapted for their preservation. It is certain that no such slaughter or burial has occurred in this locality since the advent of the white settlers into Blue Earth county in 1852. Neither was there any indication then of any graves on the spot, nor any tradition among the Indians, as far as known, of any such slaughter. Since the establishment of Fort Snelling, through the creation of the Sioux

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Agency, the planting of trading posts by the American Fur Company under General Sibley, and the founding of the Sioux mission stations by the American Board, all in the Minnesota valley, and each furnishing regular written reports, the events of the valley have been fairly well known. But there is no account of any white 289 men being killed or lost in the region of the Blue Earth; and it is hard to conceive of so many whites being killed, and afterward buried by white men, without history knowing something about it. It is indeed hard to believe that even so many Indians could have been massacred in this locality since Fort Snelling was established, and we not know of it.

To whom, then, do these skeletons belong? Who did the killing, and who performed the burial?

The Indians were not in the habit of burying in dug graves. They had no tools adapted for digging. They sometimes would lay a body on the surface of the ground and raise a mound over it with loose earth carried in baskets, but that was not the way in this case.

The only time prior to the coming of the present settlers when there were any white people in this locality who possessed implements for digging, was in 1700 and 1701, when Le Sueur maintained here at Fort L'Huillier a company of French miners prospecting for copper.

From Penicaut's account of this expedition we learn that the fort was abandoned in the late summer or autumn of 1701, because of an attack made in its vicinity by a band of Maskoutins and Foxes, allied tribes of Wisconsin Indians, who killed three Frenchmen in some woods about two gun-shots beyond the fort. Penicaut himself had left the fort the previous spring, and hence his statement regarding this matter is very meager and it is evident that he did not know any of the particulars.

On pages 48 and 49 of the "History of the Minnesota Valley" is given a letter dated August 31st, 1703, written by La Mothe Cadillac, then in command at the French post at Detroit. From this letter we learn that just at this time there was a very bitter warfare between

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the Foxes and their allies on one hand and the Sioux on the other, that the former were determined to prevent the French from establishing trading posts among their enemies, the Sioux, and that Le Sueur's expedition to the Blue Earth country had particularly aroused their opposition.

It is therefore not improbable that this mound may mark the spot where, in 1701, a large band of Fox and Maskoutin or Miami warriors made an ambush for a number of the Sioux as they were 290 coming into or out of the fort; that they carried away the heads of their detested foes as trophies for the scalp dance; and, word of the terrible catastrophe which had befallen the Sioux being immediately carried to the fort close by, that the garrison of miners who then occupied it went out with their picks and shovels and buried the bodies. These Frenchmen must have been quite intimately acquainted with this band of Blue Earth Sioux as they had been among them about a year, and even common humanity, aside from friendship, would dictate to the simple miners the propriety of giving their red friends the rite of burial, especially since their bodies lay on or beside the main road or trail, within a mile and three-quarters from the fort. As the twelve who composed the garrison at this time, with d'Eraque, their commander, all seem to have reported later, in the spring of 1702, at the French settlements near the mouth of the Mississippi, it is evident that none of them were killed. It appears, however, that traders frequented the fort, and the three Frenchmen reported by Penicaut to have been killed may have been attached to them, and if there were three whites among the slain it would add another incentive for the burial. Such a massacre, so close to Fort L'Huillier, and inspired partly as a protest to its establishment, would naturally terrify the miners and give good reason for their sudden abandonment of it.

While in a measure this explanation of mine is a theory, still it seems to me to be the only theory which will fully accord with all the facts of this recent discovery.